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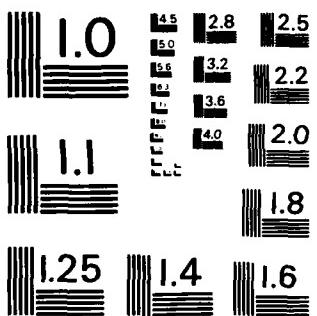
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NAVY WIVES' VIEWS ON THE
REENLISTMENT DECISION:
REASONS FOR AND REASONS
AGAINST

Barbara L. Weinstein
and
Lee Roy Beach

University of Washington

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) Groups of Navy Wives were asked to identify the reasons that argued for and against reenlistment by their spouses. This report describes the responses to that request. In spite of many reasons that argue against reenlistment, the wives were strongly supportive of reenlistment.		



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Navy Wives' Views on the Reenlistment Decision:

Reasons For and Reasons Against

Barbara L. Weinstein and Lee Roy Beach

University of Washington

This study is part of a project aimed at producing an automated system for helping Naval enlisted personnel carefully consider their decision about whether to reenlist. As part of this project, conversations were held with each of 99 Naval enlisted persons to discover the reasons that weighed for and the reasons that weighed against reenlistment. In the course of these conversations it became clear that the opinions of spouses (usually wives because 90% of the participants were male and 50% were currently married), were extremely important in the decisions. Often, however, it appeared that the participants were less able to articulate their spouses' concerns than they were their own, even though they said that their spouses' concerns were exerting an influence upon the decision. In light of this, it seemed prudent to see if the spouses' concerns were similar to those of the participants; if they were not, it would be necessary to design the decision aiding system to take the dissimilarities into account and to provide a way to give spouses' concerns appropriate influence in the decision process.

As a result, it was decided to conduct the present, rather informal study. The format involved group discussions rather than individual interviews because it proved difficult to obtain access to

individual spouses. This, together with the fact that the present participants were self selected and were involved in ongoing organized wives' groups, means that what follows is not truly representative of what a broader sample of Navy wives might yield. However, in view of the difficulties involved in getting participants, it probably is the best that can be done under the circumstances.

Method

Cooperation of two groups of wives was obtained through the Family Service Center at a large Naval installation in the Puget Sound area of Washington State. (We appreciate the cooperation of the Center and of the Command of the installation.) The groups were asked by a Center coordinator if they would be willing to talk with a researcher from the University of Washington about their views on Navy life as it pertained to reenlistment. Although the discussions were to be tape recorded, anonymity was promised and only first names were used; those who did not wish to participate simply did not attend the session. The Center coordinator was not present during the hour-long sessions and the tapes were erased immediately after this report was written.

There were 16 participants in all. The first group consisted of 9 wives; all but one had been married to their present husbands for several years and had spent all of their married lives as Navy wives. The one exception was a newly married woman who already had become an accepted part of the group. The second group consisted of 7 wives; again, all but one had been married to their present husbands for

several years and had been Navy wives for that time. The one exception was engaged to a Naval enlisted man and was accepted as part of the group. Because there were no particular differences between the groups in terms of what was discussed, they will be treated as one group.

The discussion was relatively unstructured to encourage spontaneity. However, to insure that the same set of topics was touched upon by both groups, the researcher consulted the following list and steered the discussion in the necessary directions to cover the topics on the list. Aside from this, the style was informal, friendly, open-ended, and pretty much restricted to issues concerning reenlistment.

The list of topics was:

1. Good things about Navy life.
2. Bad things about Navy life.
3. Effects of separation (cruises, etc.).
4. Effects of moving (relocation).
5. Finances.
6. Other resources (commissary, medical/dental, etc.).
7. Reenlistment decision preference.

Results

The following summarizes the major concerns and comments expressed by the 16 women who took part in the informal discussion sessions.

Good things about Navy life. The best things about Navy life

were job security and assurance of a paycheck every two weeks. The wives also liked the travel opportunities afforded by the Navy and they appreciated the medical, dental, and other benefits. They liked the relaxed atmosphere of work when their spouses were stationed on shore, saying that their husbands often could get time off when needed, as compensation for long hours on duty, something that usually was not possible in civilian life. They liked the idea of early retirement and the possibility of their spouses having a second career upon retirement from the Navy. They liked the opportunity to meet different kinds of people in the Navy and in their travels, and felt that Navy friends were "their family." They also liked the possibilities for continued education and training for their spouses as well as the opportunities for advancement with corresponding increases in pay.

Bad things about Navy life. The worst thing about Navy life was separation because of sea duty; spouses often were absent at holidays and on other special occasions. However, short separations had their compensations in the form of increased appreciation of their husbands and "honeymoon reunions." As might be expected, long separations were difficult. Often they resulted in financial problems and the wife having to assume the role as the head of the family, which led to difficulties both for the children and for the parents. (One wife said that it took about six weeks to adjust to the role change.) All felt that Navy wives lead especially stressful lives, and in order to survive, they had to learn to accommodate to various circumstances as they arose.

Effects of separation. Wives said that how they react to

separation can make or break a marriage. Navy life made them stronger because they had to learn to be independent when their husbands were away. At the same time, many thought that wives often feel isolated when their husbands are away because they do not understand what their husbands are doing and why it is important. Not knowing why the separation is necessary makes it harder to accept, especially for the less educated wives who often do not understand the bigger picture of the Navy's mission. One wife described the emotional stages wives go through when their husbands leave for sea duty: First was loneliness, then resentment, then a feeling of rejection and anger toward the husband and the cruise, and finally acceptance and adjustment. All wives agreed that the first cruise is particularly difficult for young wives with young children and that the resulting depression was a normal reaction.

Effects of moving. Some wives said that they liked moving--they got used to it and became restless if they stayed more than three years in one place. Others were less enthused. These wives disliked the packing and unpacking, the necessity of having to clean up the old house and then clean up a new one, the loss of deposit money if the old house was not clean enough or if things were broken, etc. A major concern was the cost of moving. Even though the Navy seems to think that the move is covered financially, everyone agreed that there are substantial out-of-pocket expenses that take time to recover from after the move.

Moves were seen as especially hard on the children, although it was felt that, on the whole, Navy children are better adjusted than most children. Because each school's standards are different, in one

school a child might be at the top of his or her class and in the next he or she might have to struggle to keep up. One participant said that the first two years in a new location were particularly difficult for her - it took her family three years to really feel comfortable and then it was almost time to move again.

The participants also spoke of discrimination on the part of civilians resulting from frequent moves. Examples were employers refusing to hire Navy wives because they would soon move again and merchants refusing to cash checks or extend credit lest the Navy family be in the process of moving. Moving also brought up the issue of shortages in and inadequacies of base housing. However, most wives prefer base housing because it is affordable, it is easier to make friends among the other Navy wives, and, of course, there is no discrimination because of their connection with the Navy.

Finances. The wives were concerned about poor pay, while acknowledging that medical and commissary benefits helped stretch their income. Young families in particular never experience the sense of freedom that an adequate income can provide. However, money is a problem for all families (most live from one paycheck to another) and they learn to budget, look for low cost entertainment, and generally learn to make do. Many were concerned about their inability to save for their children's educations. Resentment was expressed about reenlistment bonuses; it was felt that all the men worked hard and deserved the bonuses that were available to the few that the Navy especially wanted to retain.

Other resources. The wives said that the Family Service Centers should be used more by families. They wanted mandatory classes about

available resources, including Navy Relief, base facilities, community resources, and low cost or free entertainment in the area. Food stamp information for lower ranks also would be helpful. Classes held about one month prior to the husband leaving on a cruise (particularly a first cruise) also would be helpful in assisting wives in completing the necessary paperwork, budgeting, etc. There was little specific discussion of other resources (the commissary, medical care, etc.) because they were mentioned in the context of other topics. Most wives generally seemed to be satisfied with such resources (although the enlisted personnel in our earlier research often complained that such resources did not provide the great financial advantages they were generally assumed to provide).

Reenlistment decision preference. The wives were asked whether they would choose for their husbands to remain in the Navy. Of the 16 participants, 12 responded yes, 3 responded no, and 1 didn't respond because she and her husband were too new to the Navy for her to have formed an opinion. As was mentioned at the beginning of this report, this sample is not representative of Navy wives in general. Nonetheless, it is interesting that in spite of all of the negative aspects of Navy life that these women brought up, 12/15 = 80% were in favor of reenlistment. (Because of anonymity we could not compare the wives' preferences with their husbands' preferences.)

Conclusion

The issues raised by these wives are similar in most respects, although different in emphasis, to those raised by the 99 Naval

enlisted personnel who took part in our earlier research. The major difference is that the enlisted personnel focused much more closely upon the concrete aspects of their jobs and how they felt about them, although the effects of their Naval careers upon their families were not overlooked. The reasons for and against reenlistment that were obtained from Navy wives in the present study will be used in conjunction with those obtained in the earlier study in designing a scheme for helping enlisted personnel thoroughly consider their reenlistment decisions.

Footnote

The authors wish to express their gratitude to the wives who participated in this study and to the Family Service Center staff who helped make the study possible.

11 January 1984

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